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Kevin Diller

Theology's Epistemological Dilemma. How Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga Provide a Unified Response (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 326 pp., \$38.00, ISBN 9780830839063.

This book is not just a comparison of two of the most prominent 20th century Reformed thinkers. Had it been restricted to that task, it would already have been a wonderful achievement, given the varying intellectual and cultural milieus Barth and Plantinga stem from (German idealism and Anglo-saxon analytical philosophy respectively) and the heterogeneous character of their philosophical and theological thought. The book also contains, however, Diller's own attempt to answer one of the most urgently felt theological questions of our time. Here is the epistemological dilemma (or "grounding problem") that Diller sets out to address, helpfully outlined in his first chapter: how can Christians be confident that knowledge of the triune God is a real human possibility, whilst also admitting that they themselves are fallible human beings who should always tread carefully in their own knowledge claims, showing proper epistemic humility? Diller is adamant that we should sacrifice neither of these commitments. If we relinquish confidence in the know-ability of God, "theology becomes impotent and largely irrelevant"; if we ignore our epistemic fallibility, we "violate our own theological principles, and (...) threaten to abandon and distort the very object of theology" (17),—because in that case we will easily end up with our own facile image of God. (Augustine is not quoted in the book, but his *si comprehendis, non est Deus* makes this point in a most succinct way.)

Diller then points out that both Barth and Plantinga have made "wrestling with these problems a key feature of their work" (20). It is clear that Barth is Diller's real hero in this regard. Following Barth, Diller emphasizes time and again that knowledge of God cannot be achieved humanly, so that the only answer we can give to the epistemological grounding problem is that we simply "find ourselves (...) addressed by God" (42). No further theoretical underpinning of this event is possible—but no denial either. We will not find such appeals to the all-decisive event of revelation very frequently in Plantinga's oeuvre. Still, as Diller makes clear, this "theo-foundational" approach is also constitutive for Plantinga's theory of warranted Christian belief. For this theory does not hinge on arguments that aim to show the truth of the Christian faith, but on the observation that we may just find ourselves believing in the triune God in a warranted non-inferential way.

In a couple of detailed studies, Diller analyses Barth's theology of revelation (Ch. 2) and his views on the role of philosophy (Ch. 3), removing in the process

some caricatures that have gained traction among philosophers with mainly second-hand knowledge of Barth (such as that he had “little use for philosophy”, 67). Next, similar chapters follow on Plantinga’s views on the nature of Christian philosophy (Ch. 4) and on his famous warrant-epistemology (Ch. 5). Once again, Diller paves the way for a *rapprochement* by carefully dispelling some misunderstandings of Plantinga’s intentions that often go unchallenged, this time mostly in theological circles. The surveys of both Barth and Plantinga are helpful in that they offer concise but sufficiently nuanced accounts of their respective epistemologies.

Next, Diller draws the various lines together into a “unified Barth/Plantinga approach to Christian theological epistemology”, summing up ten relevant points on which there is “a great deal of alignment” (172) between the two (Ch. 6). This account is then fleshed out and tested in three contested areas: the role of natural theology, the nature of faith, and the normativity of Holy Scripture (Chs. 7–9).

Of these areas, the first one provides the tallest order, since here we have a historical minefield—but Diller navigates the sensitive issues in a most skillful and laudably clear way. Yet, it seems to me that Diller underestimates the importance that natural theological arguments (despite the fact that he does not ‘need’ them) still have for Plantinga. Whereas Barth was crystal clear that knowledge of God worthy of that name can never be based on some human faculty (such as the *sensus divinitatis*) or activity (such as reasoning), but only on God’s transforming self-revelation, it is Plantinga who not only gives pride of place to the *sensus* but also—e.g. in his oft-quoted paper “Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments”—ascribes a positive role to theistic arguments; clearly, his views here are much more reminiscent of Calvin than of Barth, according to whom any propositional knowledge of God apart from participation in God’s triune life through faith “does us no good” (191). Another concern is that, despite their agreement on this issue, both Barth and Plantinga, on Diller’s construal, tend to make Christian faith in the end largely into a subjective affair (as Pannenberg complained vis-à-vis Barth), underestimating the faith-constituting role of the public testimony witnessed in the gospels.

All in all, however, this is an extremely well-argued and timely book, breaking a lot of traditional barriers between Christian theologians and philosophers. I for one have become convinced by Diller that Barth’s and Plantinga’s approaches of “the grounding problem” are indeed—though far from identical—complementary in highly fruitful ways. Congratulations are also due to Diller’s supervisor, Prof. Alan Torrance (St. Andrews), whose own intellectual biography—with its remarkable shift from Barth to Plantinga—now turns out to be less strange than some may have thought.

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